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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze, categorize, and critique actual responses to expressed student confusion and frustration with online courses. Samplings of actual student messages from two courses were used to frame instructor responses, as well as a focus group survey of current college students. The focus of the study was the instructor's responses to these student messages. The researchers utilized a narrative perspective for categorizing the instructor's responses. This approach allowed for a broad perspective for categorizing and critiquing the rhetorical prudence of the instructor's responses. The researchers added to the credibility of the categories of responses by asking non-class members what they thought of the instructor's responses. Finally, suggestions for communicating instructor care and concern online are included. Contains 10 references. An appendix contains the survey for the focus group. (Author/RS)

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Running Header: Communicating Care Online

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Caring On-Line: On-Line Empathy, Self-Disclosure, Emotional Expression, and Nurturing

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analysis, categorize, and critique actual responses to expressed student confusion and frustration with online courses. Samplings of actual student messages from two courses were used to frame instructor responses, as well as a focus group survey with current college students. The focus of the study was the instructor's responses to these student messages. We utilized a narrative perspective for categorizing the instructor's responses. This approach allowed us a broad perspective for categorizing and critiquing the rhetorical prudence of the instructor's responses. We added to the credibility of the categories of responses by asking non-class members what they thought of the instructor's responses. Finally, we concluded by making suggestions for communicating instructor care and concern online.

Caring On-Line: On-Line Empathy, Self-Disclosure,

Emotional Expression, and Nurturing

Recently, the second author attended an orientation meeting with various university heads and during a break in the business made the following comment to a Dean: "Sometimes these meetings go way to long. It seems that the same information could be distributed through email." The Dean responded by saying, "Oh, it's vital that we have time for touch. Tech is not enough." In other words, tech does not meet a very "human" and strong need regarding the communication process that being face to face encounters that might result in actual physical contact. Is tech alone enough? Is touch as implied by the Dean a vital and necessary part of the communication process? Can the need for touch ever be met through email? With the Dean's comments regarding tech and touch in mind, it seems natural to ask if online education can deliver the educational goods without actual touch? In other words, if an administrator thinks that face-to-face is necessary for business to be conducted, can any real educational goals be met solely online? In this paper, we attempt to address this concern. We postulate that at the heart of the communication process is language and that through language the requirements for touch can be met.

Higher education is experiencing a revolution in educational presentation. That revolution involves the use of the Internet to deliver course content. With every revolution there are casualties. Casualties online come in the form of student frustration with technology. In this study we intend to analyze, categorize, and critique actual responses to expressed student confusion and frustration with online courses in order to gather a growing awareness of the emotional effects of the educational revolution on the

learner. Little, if any, research exists specifically looking at how online education effects the learner. Some research outside educational research has focused on the emotion and communication styles in the workplace that may offer some insight (Waldron, 1996, Putnam, 1997, Pearce, 1992), but a specific focus on the emotional effects of online curriculum in the educational "workplace" is lacking.

Students who enter online courses that already possess the technological skill needed to participate in the course may be prepared for the revolution, but many are not prepared. Therefore, we ask this general research question to guide our inquiry, "What kind of caring responses (touch) from a professor does the online (tech) learner need?"

Method

In order to understand the responses to expressed student confusion and frustration with online courses, 73 actual responses from a professor teaching twodifferent online classes were analyzed. The data was gathered from all e-mail messages that the professor sent to students who expressed some confusion about the expectations, or frustration with the technical aspect of the course.

In order to examine our hypothesis from a different perspective, a group of college students enrolled at Montana State University in Billings were also surveyed re: their need for interaction with the professor. The students were enrolled in an upper division class at the university. They brought with them at least three years of experience

as higher education learners and were knowledgeable and articulate about what they needed from professors in order to learn.

The observer was not part of the class and had no role except to collect and analyze the data. Quotes from students were not analyzed and for purposes of this paper, will be reported in a general fashion so as not to identify particular students. Quotes from the professor will be used verbatim and serve as the collectable data in this qualitative study. Only those messages sent via the computer were analyzed. Any phone conversations, face-to-face conversations, or hard copy responses between the professor and students were not included as data for purposes of this study. A copy of the survey that was distributed to and used as a basis for discussion in the student focus group appears in Appendix A.

Results

The results of the focus group survey are as follows:

- Most students believe that the two most important tasks of a professor are these: to spell out from the beginning what the expectations of the course will be, and secondly, to be a "facilitator" of the students' learning. The old cliché about a college or university being the place where students come to drink from the cup of knowledge has become passé. It's been replaced by an expectation from students that professors will act more as facilitators of learning; not by pouring knowledge

in, but by whetting their appetites and guiding them in the direction to seek and obtain more knowledge.

- Students want and need timely feedback about their work. Even if they are doing well as far as a grade in the course, they still need reassurance from their professor. Students needed to be "in touch" with the professor to maintain their confidence about their learning.
- When students become confused or frustrated with a certain aspect of an online class, the best source of encouragement for them was the professor. While students sometimes turn to other students or a technical person for assistance when they are frustrated, it is evident that the professor plays an important role in helping them deal with that frustration. Almost none of them felt they could forge ahead on their own without the professor's help. If they sought help technically from another source (other students or a technical assistant), they had a need to report to the professor that they had been having technical difficulties and describe to the professor how they had solved the problem.

The analysis of the professor's responses on line can be categorized into these main classifications:

1) orientation and facilitation, 2) reassurance, and 3) encouragement.

Orientation and Facilitation

Orientation and facilitation refers to those responses made by the professor early in the start of the online course. These responses ground the student in terms of the expectations

for the online course. For example, in response to learning from the technician that many students were confused about what to do with the lessons once they got to the online course, the professor wrote:

> Some of you might be confused about how to proceed within each lesson. I'm sorry if it has been confusing. Some of the confusion may be due to the limited time we all had in becoming familiar with eCollege. I promise you that I will update and improve lessons as I become increasingly familiar with the new system. Now, if I were you, this is how I would approach each lesson.

The professor goes on to give 5 chronological steps students can take to approach the lessons on line: ready the lesson over in its entirety online, then read the textbook, then view the Power Point presentations and audio clips, then go to the threaded discussions, and finally respond to the discussion questions. The concreteness of the professor's suggestions was helpful to students in organizing themselves cognitively, but also the empathic response of acknowledging their confusion and addressing it openly was a relief for many of them.

Facilitation is slightly different from orientation, though still on a very concrete level of thinking. This refers to the professor's responses to students who were frustrated with their own lack of skills in getting around in eCollege. The professor would actually walk the student through the steps of some technical skill, e.g., how to attach a document to an e-mail, facilitating the skills they needed to be successful in the online course. Sometimes it required the professor to refer the student for more technical help from the eCollege technician. The following quotes illustrate a patient and sometimes humorous

response to students' requests for help using facilitation: In response to a student who could not download the Power Point slides, the professor wrote, "I'm not sure why it's not working for you. Sorry you are having trouble. First, don't panic. We have lots of time. Second, call (the technician). He knows all kinds of things about the technical aspects. It is most likely a technical issue and therefore not your problem."

In response to a student who didn't know how to send in his lessons, the professor explained how to send the lessons through eCollege and added this note, "If it (the procedure) isn't clear, please let me know. Sorry you are having trouble. We are all learning in this process. Please be patient with me as I learn this new system also. Hope this helps."

In response to one student who joined an on-line chat group, thinking that was the same as the threaded discussion for the class, the professor wrote instructions about how to access the discussions FOR THE CLASS, and added, "Joining in the threaded discussion helps you understand the concepts and prepare for the exams. The discussions aren't graded, however, you participation will benefit everyone. You already know how to e-mail me, but now learn how to join the discussion within eCollege for this course. Let me know how you do."

Reassurance

Even students who were doing well in finding their way around the course needed reassurance that they were doing the right thing. Most of the messages were regarding whether or not the professor had actually received their lessons or their attachments. The

professor sent many reassuring messages to students to let them know that they were in fact on the right track.

Examples of empathic reassurance messages:

"Yes, I got your assignment. All is well. You are doing fine."

"(Your lesson) arrived. Thanks. We'll have a good experience."

"Well, we are making contact now. I guess we don't need (the technician) anymore. Thanks."

"I'm not sure I received all the messages you sent today. There seem to be some bugs. Hang in there and stay with it."

"Yes, (the lesson) came. Good to have you on board."

"Good work. Keep it up."

"Thanks. Good to have you. I had a little trouble opening your attachment, but all is well now."

"I don't know if I got back to you. (Your lesson) arrived. Good work. Thanks."

In response to a student who wondered if he/she was missing something somewhere, the professor wrote, "I'll check to see if you are missing anything. Sorry that this is so confusing."

As students became more comfortable in the technical end of the online course, they still needed lots of reassurance that they had in fact mastered the communication channels for the course.

Encouragement

Encouragement refers to those responses the professor made to students if they became frustrated somewhat later in the course. The students may have had trouble accessing a particular lesson or Power Point presentation, or they may have gotten behind, or they may have missed a lesson. Encouragement is a more assertive empathic response than is reassurance. One might think of reassurance as a pat on the back, while encouragement is more like leading them by the hand for a while. Here are examples of encouraging responses from the professor:

"So, take part in the class on a weekly basis. Even if you get behind, keep going. There is some flexibility built into the course, so you can get it done."

"I hope this little note helps. Please let me know what problems you are having. 'We' can make it together."

"I'm proud of you for trying."

"Please respond only to the questions that make sense to you. If you are having difficulty with some, let me know. I'll help."

"I'm glad you're still trying to send me (that lesson). If you can't complete the lesson in a timely manner, just send what you have and move on to the next. I'm sorry for your inconvenience."

"Do what you can and move on."

"Okay. Just get going. You can catch up."

One student reported feeling panicked and ready to drop the class. To this student the professor wrote, "Panic is never an option. I will help you. Don't drop. We'll figure this out together and I have built a lot of flexibility into the course so you can catch up if you fall behind."

The students throughout the course needed the professor's encouragement responses. Even though they may have mastered the skills and technology to participate in the class, they got frustrated and discouraged with glitches in the system.

Discussion

Students who took this course online needed an empathic response from the professor on three levels: 1) orientation and facilitation to get through the initial confusion and instruction in accessing the class; 2) reassurance that they had in fact learned how to participate in the online course in the expected fashion, and 3) encouragement when they ran into the inevitable glitches that are rampant in the technology today.

The added dimension of a professor having to give additional response to students' frustration in an online class is a rather neglected aspect of teaching a college course online, yet it is an essential ingredient in the success of a course that goes on line. Professors who are learning to teach online need to be aware that their students will need some empathic messages, not just feedback on the course content.

In conclusion, students felt that their online professors needed to help them become oriented, not only to the content of the course, but also to the technological aspects of the course. However, becoming masterful at using the technology to learn was not enough, even though all the content of the course was available for a student to use and assimilate at his/her own pace. Students also needed reassuring and encouraging language from the professor in order to facilitate their learning. High tech does not preclude the need for high touch.

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Appendix A

Survey for Focus Group

Vicki Burford
Focus Group Inquiry

READ THOUGH ALL THE CHOICES BEFORE YOU START RANKING THEM.

Please rank these in order of importance, using the numbers one through six.

___ It is important to me that I know from the beginning what work is expected of me.

___It is important to me that the professor facilitates my learning.

___It is important to me that the professor be an expert in his/her field.

___It is important to me that I get feedback about my work as soon as possible.

___Even if I'm doing well in a course, it's important to me to receive reassurance from the professor that I'm doing well.

___I'm comfortable with little or no feedback from the professor as long as I feel I am learning in the class.

RANK THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS BY THEIR ORDER OF IMPORTANCE.
#1 = most important
#2= next important
#3= least important

___When I am confused about how to approach an assignment, it is important to me that I talk with the professor to gain clarification and insight.

___When I am confused about how to approach an assignment, it is important to me that I talk with other students to gain clarification and insight.

___When I am confused about how to approach an assignment, it is important to me to get it done by the deadline so I will just do it and hope it is right.